Just Play Catch, Kid

Coach Keith, if you’re listening,

I remember the lead-off batter step up to the plate in my very first game for Jimmy’s Hip Hop, twisting his feet back and forth to loosen the dirt in the batter’s box,

The tan, dusty field dirt rising like steam

As the warm breeze blew the dust onto my face, plaguing my eyes with a thin layer of dirt,

I heard your cliché slogan:

“Just play catch, kid”

I tossed a sideways glance in your direction, pretending not to hear you

You didn’t see me looking, but I saw your mountainous, bear-like frame nonchalantly leaning against the dugout fence, the fence creaking from your weight

Dreadlocks leaking out of the fire engine red hat representing Jimmy’s.

That was four months ago.

Now I see the article in the newspaper with your name:

“Keith Wylie” under the Obituary section

“Keith Cole Wylie, age 51, of New Haven, tragically entered into eternal life on Saturday October 7, 2017.”

The radio often blared a scratchy song of names

Names, dates, ways of death

Just something I heard on the radio,

National news, nothing in my heart’s neighborhood

And I wish imposters shouting of murder and violence had never snuck into my heart’s villa.

As I learned more of your death, I kept thinking:

Just four months earlier, we were standing on the dusty dirt of a Pop Smith Little League baseball field, the sandy grime cartwheeling through the air, making a dirt film develop on our eyeballs

And now I stand on that field alone.

After just four months.

And that’s unfair!

Such a quarrel, ending with a man dead on the ground, sixteen slits marring his body, which had gone from full of life to lifeless in mere minutes.

And that’s unfair!

“The two men were fighting over [the accused’s] girlfriend, who previously had been Wylie’s girlfriend,” another article said.

A father, a son, a brother, a grandfather, a friend, and a coach all died in one moment, all because of a girlfriend

Four months ago, trauma and I were strangers

If we passed each other on the street, we would barely have exchanged nods of acknowledgement

I would have had to examine my history with glasses, no a microscope, to find a trace of hurt anywhere beyond losing the final piece of a 1000-piece puzzle

And now here I was, so close to the obvious pain that I needed to click the “zoom out” button

Had I been ignorant about the ugliness of the human race?

And I teleport back to the first game I played for Jimmy’s:

I’m on the mound again, the outfield lights illuminating the batter’s serious face,

His eyes staring directly into mine

I break the stare by gazing out at the fans on the bleachers, my ears tingling with the shouts of “You go, baby!” and “C’mon now! You got this!”

I wiggle my toes in my cleats, attempting to ignore my jersey sticking to my torso like tape

I swivel my head back to the field, my eyes scanning over the bent fence of the backstop and the umpire leaning, wearing huge pads covered with a blue shirt

I see the catcher flash his index finger, telling me to throw a fastball

I nod in confirmation of the pitch choice

The clapping in the stands fades away and I hear my breathing

The top of my glove is in the lower portion of my eyeline

I caress the soft, smooth inside of my glove with one hand,

Learn every part of the baseball’s stitching with the other.

And *snap*, I’m ripped back to the shivering reality of you being gone

In the span of a couple days, my body had morphed from a child to a full-grown adult, my naivety leaving me so fast it almost broke the sound barrier.

How could a disagreement turn into a gruesome murder so quickly?

Are people naturally violent?

I looked it up on the internet, to stop the continuous roller coaster that my inquisitive, angry, curious thoughts were riding:

The number of homicides in the US was over 15,000 per year, and many of the statistics included an asterisk stating that this figure was only the officially recorded count.

I tasted yesterday’s lunch in my throat as I stared at my computer screen

That 15,000 was 15,000 names with 15,000 families,

15,000 lives.

Each name flew off the screen into my brain, entering an iron vault in my mind that had previously been unused

Coach Keith, your death has bashed in the door to so many epiphanies about violence, yet you’re just one of over 15,000

My knees weaken at the thought of comprehending 15,000 times what I had just experienced with your death

The spikes of trauma on my mind eventually glazed over

Became almost forgotten

Flattened until the naked eye would easily overlook any trace of their existence

The sheer magnitude of homicides in our country is a Novocaine to our mouths

Numbness afflicts our brains after so much death has bolted into our ears

But this is the coward’s way out

Numbness will force us to never heal,

The gauze must be yanked off

So, Coach Keith, here’s me unwrapping my gauze,

And under that bandage, there’s your wide, toothy smile, right at the top of the bloody scab.

The knife piercing your skin often fights to cloud out the fond memories I have of being coached by you.

I don’t let it.

“Just play catch, kid”

“Just play catch, kid”

“Just play catch, kid”

Your fragmented words forever glitch through my mind.